THE NEW YORK TIMES
30 April 1978

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Closer C.I.A.-White House Ties Raise Doubts on Agency's Independence

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 29—The Carter Administration's drive to make analyses prepared by the intelligence community more relevant to White House needs is raising questions in Administration and Congressional circles over whether the Central Intelligence Agency is able to exercise independence on sensitive policy issues.

This concern is said to be reflected in a report by the Senate Intelligence Committee, scheduled for release in the near future, which suggests that a much-publicized C.I.A. study on Soviet oil production may have been manipulated by the White House.

The committee report says that the study's conclusion that the Soviet Union would become a larger importer of oil in the early 1980's was probably wrong, but that the White House used the prediction to develop public support for President Carter's energy program.

Some officials maintain that this episode, which occurred last year, is symptomatic of a new set of delicate problems that the Administration is encountering in trying to make intelligence estimates more relevant to Administration policy.

With top foreign policy officials taking an important role in determining what the C.I.A. addresses, the agency may be too accommodating, some aides suggest. "When the White House orders up a study," one agency official said, "it is usually pretty clear what results it is looking cor."

The Administration has made a concerted effort, in its plan to reorganize the intelligence establishment and in recent changes made by the Director of Central Intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner, to strengthen and centralize assessment capabilities that withered in the Vietnam period and were further weakened by interagency feuding in the Nixon-Ford years.

Addressing New Questions

The Administration's effort, which began last summer, is also designed to redirect intelligence work to such new problems as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, which are of growing interest to policy-makers. These steps have won the approval of most intelligence officers as well as the two congressional intelligence committees.

But in undertaking these changes, several intelligence officials said recently, the Administration has begun to confront a familiar problem: how to insure that intelligence information that appears to run counter to existing policy is neither suppressed nor distorted. This problem, officials said, first emerged in a serious way in the mid-1960's.

According to intelligence officials who served at the time, C.I.A. estimates that appeared to challenge President Johnson's policy of increasing military commitment to South Vietnam were ignored by such top foreign-policy aides as Eugene Rostow, the Presidential national security adviser. Accordingly, communications between the C.I.A. and the White House became increasingly strained. As the former Presidential adviser, McGeorge Bundy, testified recently before Congress, C.I.A. Director John McCone's access to President Johnson declined sharply after 1966.

The estrangement persisted during President Nixon's first term, when, according to one former official, the C.I.A. became "a service operation for Henry Kissinger." The official said Mr. Kissinger, as Presidential adviser, strongly distrusted Richard Helms, then the Director of Central Intelligence, and made sure that analysis work on important intelligence questions was performed by his own staff.

The C.I.A.'s problems were compounded in the Nixon years by its disagreements with Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, who contended that the agency's estimates of the growth of Soviet military capabilities were too low. In the early 1970's, Mr. Laird argued with Mr. Helms over whether a new Soviet missile, the SS-9, was equipped with multiple warheads. Although the C.I.A.'s contention that the missile did not possess such a capability was ultimately proved right, the dispute badly damaged the credibility of C.I.A. estimates.

Central Section Dismantled

Morale was further weakened when James R. Schlesinger, upon becoming director of the agency in 1973, responded to concerns over intelligence bias by dismantling the central analysis section in the agency, the Office of National Estimates. Aided by the Board of National Estimates, a group of academics and specialists who advised on intelligence questions, the office had built a reputation for accuracy and independence in the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.

Mr. Schlesinger replaced both the Board and the Office of National Estimates with a group of national intelligence officers, each responsible for a different area of analysis. "There was a feeling," one official recalled, "that they were a bunch of staff officials whose basic job was to match intelligence evidence to the views of the White House."

Now, in the Administration's effort to make sure that the C.I.A.'s views are not shunted aside, the role of the Director has been strengthened and an effort has been made to insure that Admiral Turner sees Mr. Carter at least once a week. At the same time, a Cabinet-level intelligence committee has been established, enabling such "consumers" of intelligence information as Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance and Secretary of Defense Harold R. Brown to define other needs.

Within the agency, Admiral Turner in October established the National Foreign Assessment Center, headed by Robert R. Bowie, Mr. Turner's deputy for national intelligence. Officials say that the center, similar to the old Office of Estimates, is designed to improve analysis by pulling together estimates done by different C.I.A. offices and other agencies.

There is widespread agreement that C.I.A. studies now have greater visibility in the Government and that agency reports are becoming more useful to policy-makers. The problem, as the official put it, "is that while C.I.A. work is no longer ignored, there is a growing danger that intelligence and policy will become indistinguishable."

Reinforced by Turner

This danger is said to stem from the Administration's attempt to make the Director of Central Intelligence a more influential figure—a tendency that has been reinforced, officials say, by Admiral Turner's strong appetite for political power.

"They may not know it," said a former high-ranking intelligence official, "but they are on the verge of turning the Director of Central Intelligence into a political job."

In the case of the C.I.A. study on Soviet oil production, the Senate committee has not accused the agency of shaping its findings to meet White House needs. The committee reportedly has suggested that the C.I.A. made an analytical error in its report, but more troubling, according to some committee officials, is that Mr. Carter announced the findings last April in dramatic fashion at a press conference, in an obvious appeal for support for Administration energy plans.

In some other cases in the last year, some members of the Senate committee believe, the C.I.A. has bent facts to meet White House views. One example is said to be a contention by the agency that a proposed Soviet-American accord limiting strategic arms could be verified using reconnaissance satellites, an opinion apparently questioned by several intelligence officers.

Another alleged instance is the failure of the C.I.A. to warn the White House of possible dangers in moving ahead with Mr. Carter's plan to withdraw some 30,000 ground forces from South Korea. "It was pretty clear that the President had made up his mind on the issue, so the agency simply fudged over the question of whether the pullout would create a military risk," a member of the Senate committee said.

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White House and C.I.A. officials alike strongly deny that intelligence studies have been used to bolster Administration policy, and they cite the frequent disputes that Admiral Turner has had with other Cabinet members as proof of the agency's independence.

Privately, however, several intelligence officials say the reorganization has led to a greater sensitivity within the intelligence establishment to White House views. In particular, the apparent effort to make more intelligence information available to the Congress and the public has made it difficult, they suggest, for the agency to adopt views that appear to undercut Administration policy.